

RECONNECTING OPPORTUNITY YOUTH: A PUBLIC HEALTH PRIORITY



INTRODUCTION



Opportunity youth, those 16–24 years of age who are not engaged in school or work, deserve to be a population of focus for the public health community. As a result of their disconnection, opportunity youth face profound short- and long-term negative consequences. Youth who are not in school or employed for at least six months are three times more likely to suffer from depression than youth who are connected to these key supports; they are also one sixth as likely to obtain a high school or college degree, hindering lifetime earnings, heightening reliance on health and income security entitlements, and increasing the risk of premature death from preventable conditions such as high blood pressure, diabetes, and stroke. [1,2] These individual costs are accompanied by a societal economic impact, with estimates ranging from \$26.8 billion to \$93 billion annually. [3]

Disconnected youth both seek opportunity and offer an opportunity to society.

There is no one reason behind youth disconnection. Across urban, rural, and tribal settings, nearly one in three opportunity youth live in poverty, a prevalence twice that of their connected peers. Their disconnection is partly a result of the effects of growing up in poverty, including low quality education, poorer health, less access to transportation, and higher rates of violence and resulting trauma, any one of which on its own can impact the ability to persevere towards graduation or maintain a job with living wages. [4,5] In comparison with their connected peers, opportunity youth are significantly more likely to struggle with substance use, more than three times as likely to have a disability, nearly five times as likely to struggle with independent living or experience adolescent parenthood, and more than twice as likely to live apart from both of their own parents, an indicator of traumatic childhood experience. [6] Opportunity youth are also more likely to have a history of court involvement, emergent bilingual status, or significant family obligations. [7] Many of these risk factors that lead to youth disconnection negatively impact physical and mental health, contribute to health disparities, and lead to long-term socioeconomic consequences.

Aligned with broader disparities in the United States, youth disconnection is inequitably distributed across racial and ethnic groups, gender, sexuality, and immigration status. In comparison with disconnection rates of 9% and 6%, respectively, among White and Asian American youth, approximately 22% of Native youth, 17% of Black youth, and 12% of Latinx youth were disconnected in 2019, and structural racism – including persistent housing, financial, and labor market discrimination – decreases the salience of protective factors such as higher education for these populations. [8] Regardless of race, rural youth fare worse than their urban and suburban counterparts: while about 12% of youth across the United States are disconnected, the rate jumps to 24% in the rural south. [9] LGBTQ+ youth – who are more than twice as likely as their cisgender and straight peers to be victims of bullying – are also at increased risk of disconnection, with more than one in five transgender students reporting having left a school because of mistreatment. [10,11] Immigrant youth, especially those who are undocumented, face unique challenges such as limited language proficiency and work authorization, barriers to cultural and social adaptation, and perceived gaps in academic or workforce preparation, which can lead to difficulty receiving recognition for foreign credentials.

While rates of disconnection have decreased in the past decade, recent data indicate there are still more than 4.11 million opportunity youth in the United States, a number that is expected to rise due to the COVID-19 pandemic and related economic downturn. [12] Developed within the context of this crisis, the following policy recommendations aim to address some of the multifaceted risk factors behind youth disconnection and propose better alignment of key systems, agencies, and data to support existing opportunity youth. Often referred to as “opportunity youth” in the United States, these youth are both seeking opportunity and offer an opportunity to society if provided proper investments and pathways to return to school and work. Ultimately, preventing youth disconnection and reengaging opportunity youth will lead to healthier, more equitable, and thriving communities.

POLICY AREAS

- 01** Targeted Investments in Early Childhood Education
- 02** Access to Comprehensive Sex Education & Reproductive Care
- 03** Equitable & Restorative Approaches to Justice in & Out of School
- 04** Policies, Systems & Structures to Support Youth Transitions
- 05** Consistent & Expanded Access to Comprehensive Support Services
- 06** Data on the Pathways to & Predictors of Disconnection

TARGETED INVESTMENTS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

While paths to disconnection vary, a commonality is that it is rarely sudden: by the time a student drops out of school or fails to make a connection to work or further education, there have been many potential points of intervention, beginning as early as early childhood. Of these, one particularly salient point is preschool. High-quality pre-K education – aligned with the National Institute of Early Education Research’s 10 quality benchmarks – provides 3- and 4-year-olds with the social, emotional, and academic foundation needed to lead healthy and prosperous lives. [13] Children who participate in pre-K are less likely to repeat a grade and are more prepared for school. [14] In addition, pre-K attendees are more likely to be physically active, have access to nutritious meals, receive health screenings, and stay up to date with immunizations and dental care. [15] These benefits pay off, with evidence showing that quality early childhood education significantly increases the likelihood of graduating high school and college, reduces teen pregnancy and crime, and leads to overall better health. [16,17] On its own, high school graduation is associated with a longer life span of up to nine years and less reliance on government health care and public services. [18,19]



Despite the well-established links among early childhood education and graduation rates, long-term health, and prosperity, access to pre-K in the United States is primarily limited to those who can afford it. Most low-income families – disproportionately Black, Latinx, and Native – are unable to provide this essential start for their children, and publicly funded options fall short of meeting need: across all publicly funded programs in the 2018–2019 academic year, only 44% of 4-year-olds and about 17% of 3-year-olds were enrolled in preschool. [20] Without universal pre-K access, students enter kindergarten with varying levels of social and academic development that create an educational achievement gap that becomes more difficult and costly to close as children advance through upper grades. [21] While universal pre-K is estimated to cost up to \$26 billion each year, the earlier that educators and health professionals can intervene to address risk factors for dropping out of school and subsequent youth disconnection, the lower the health, social, and financial costs to both the individual and the community. In fact, for every dollar spent on pre-K, there is an estimated \$7 to \$10 return on investment with the potential for federal budget savings to outpace government spending two to one within 35 years. [22]

Universal pre-K would serve the dual purpose of creating additional opportunities for low-income parents and caregivers – especially mothers – to join the workforce or continue their own education by lessening their childcare burden. Such an outcome would be particularly impactful for opportunity youth, who are more likely than their connected peers to become parents at an early age. Additional investments in two-generation models – which bring children and parents together to learn in tandem, fostering the ability of parents to meet the health, safety, and developmental needs of their children while improving their own educational and career outlook – would have the further benefit of simultaneously supporting existing opportunity youth and increasing access to the types of early interventions that can prevent future generations of disconnection. [23]

RECOMMENDATIONS

The health and social benefits of universal pre-K make it an essential step for the United States to safeguard the health of its children and prevent youth disconnection.



Congress can:

- Establish a universal pre-K program to provide states with funding to support high-quality early childhood education for all 3- and 4-year-old children and high-quality training for early childhood teachers and teaching assistants.



The Department of Education can:

- Incentivize states to invest funding in two-generation programs that combine early childhood education, family-based interventions, and workforce development opportunities for low-income and immigrant parents, caregivers, and their children.

ACCESS TO COMPREHENSIVE SEX EDUCATION & REPRODUCTIVE CARE

Until 2010, when federal funding for abstinence-only education expired and there was a shift towards more evidence-based practices, abstinence-only programming was the only form of sex education in the United States to receive federal funding. [24] Despite evidence of its failure to delay sex or reduce risky behaviors, abstinence-only education remains the most prevalent form of sex education across the country, and continued reliance on such programming contributes to a variety of public health concerns for youth. [25,26]

One such concern is adolescent pregnancy. Despite continuing declines, the teen birth rate in the United States remains high, and stark differences in access to quality sex education have led to entrenched racial and geographic disparities: in 2019, birth rates for Black, Latinx, and Native teens were more than double those of their White peers and rates for rural youth were 60% higher than in metropolitan areas. [27] Because teen parents are more likely to be out of school or work, unplanned teen pregnancy and youth disconnection are closely tied, with disconnected women and girls more than four times as likely to be mothers as their connected peers and teen mothers are only half as likely to receive their high school diploma by the age of 22. [28] Compounding this, the children of teenage mothers are more likely to experience health and academic concerns, incarceration, unemployment, and teen parenthood. [29]

In addition, the absence of a federal mandate surrounding the provision of sex education has allowed some states to implement programs that not only exclude information about LGBTQ+ sexual and reproductive health but also actively promote hostility towards LGBTQ+ youth through the framing of “alternate sexual lifestyles” as unnatural, offensive, and even criminal. In states where such lessons are legally protected, LGBTQ+ students receive less support from educators and their peers and are less able to access relevant school health services; as a result, abstinence-only education contributes to the type of hostile school environment that leads to disproportionate dropout rates among LGBTQ+ youth. [30] Physical and emotional abuse against LGBTQ+ students also contribute to a higher risk of teen pregnancy among lesbian and bisexual youth. [31]

Youth need complete, accurate information about abstinence, condoms, and contraception to prevent unintended pregnancy, form healthy relationships, and protect themselves from sexually transmitted infections. Such information can be found in high-quality, evidence-based sexual education – often termed “comprehensive sex education” – that is medically accurate, age-appropriate, and broad, covering issues related to the physical, biological, emotional, and social aspects of sexuality. Instead, Congress has spent more than \$2 billion on abstinence-only programming since 1982 with an estimated cost to society of approximately \$9.4 billion annually. [32,33] In order to act on the lessons learned from comprehensive sex education programming, youth also need access to comprehensive and confidential sexual and reproductive health care. Revitalization of the Title X program, which disproportionately serves Black, Latinx, LGBTQ+, and low-income individuals, would increase access for opportunity youth given the shared characteristics between populations facing significant barriers to health care and those at risk of disconnection. [34] In addition, new rulemaking expanding the scope of confidential sexual health care available to youth under state-level Medicaid and Title X programs to include pre-exposure prophylaxis and gender-affirming services would help further reduce barriers to care that might keep LGBTQ+ youth engaged in school.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To ensure both their health and socioeconomic success, youth need access to evidence-based sexual education and the full scope of reproductive health and contraceptive care.



Congress can...

- Align education and health policies and practices to support school health services, outline federal guidance for sexual health care provision in schools, and build the capacity of state and local officials to increase access to school health services by establishing and funding a National Commission for Advancing School Health Services convened by the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Human Services Office of Population Affairs Teen Pregnancy Prevention Program.
- Expand youth access to comprehensive and affirming sex education and reproductive health services with an emphasis on Black, Latinx, Native, AAPI, disabled, and LGBTQ+ youth by increasing funding for historically and culturally responsive programs that actively promote inclusion.

RECOMMENDATIONS



The Department of Health and Human Services can...

- Ensure that federal funding for existing initiatives, including the Personal Responsibility Education Program and the Teen Pregnancy Prevention Program, adheres to rigorous standards of evidence and complete, unbiased, science-based information in its grant announcements, grant awards, evaluations, and implementation.
- Clarify that state-level Medicaid and Title X programs should cover a broader definition of confidential sexual health services, including, but not limited to, gender-affirming services and PrEP.
- Ensure access to the full range of contraception approved by the Food and Drug Administration at no cost through insurance by limiting exceptions for employers with religious or moral objections.
- Reconstitute the Office of Adolescent Health to take on an expanded role in promoting adolescent health.
- Modify the HIPAA Privacy Rule to ensure minors can access confidential sexual health services by limiting disclosure of information to third parties.

EQUITABLE & RESTORATIVE APPROACHES TO JUSTICE IN & OUT OF SCHOOL

School disciplinary actions, such as suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to law enforcement, are ostensibly intended to maintain classroom order and protect students from harming themselves and others. However, these approaches – collectively referred to as exclusionary school discipline – are at odds with what research shows is needed to create healthy learning environments. Exclusionary practices, school policing, and zero-tolerance policies undermine protective factors that schools often provide, such as social supports and connectedness, that sustain health and emotional resilience. [35] Such practices also fail to acknowledge the role of implicit bias in disciplinary decisions – leading to disproportionate referrals for subjective offenses like disrespect and defiance for Black, Latinx, and Native students – or that “bad behaviors” are often symptoms of mental health struggles, unmet support needs, or unaddressed trauma. [36,37]

While one in six children have a diagnosable emotional, behavioral, or mental health disorder by the age of 8 years, nearly half of all children have experienced strong, frequent, or prolonged adversity, also known as adverse childhood and community experiences. Instead of contextualizing and taking a trauma-informed approach to student behaviors, however, many school districts effectively criminalize the impacts of these experiences: in 2016, approximately 14 million students were enrolled in schools that had police presence but no counselor, nurse, psychologist, or social worker on staff. [38] As a result, exclusionary practices are disproportionately applied to students subjected to broader health inequities – including those who are Black, Latinx, Native, LGBTQ+, or disabled – with significantly worse outcomes for students holding multiple marginalized identities. [39] Disproportionate disciplinary action even followed students home during the pandemic, with documented disparities in virtual learning environments across the country. [40]

The systemic racism found in school disciplinary policies mirrors that found in the criminal justice system. While the United States has cut youth incarceration in half over the last decade, Black and Native youth are five and three times more likely, respectively, to be held in custody than their White peers, with smaller disparities for Latinx youth. [41] These trends are only heightened with respect to substance use, which is simultaneously considered a risk factor leading to and an adverse outcome stemming from youth disconnection. [42] While the rates at which White youth and youth of color sell and use drugs are comparable, Black and Latinx youth are arrested, prosecuted, and incarcerated at dramatically higher rates for drug-related offenses. The disparities are particularly stark for Black youth, who are held in juvenile detention facilities for first-time charges 48 times as often as their White peers and in adult prisons three times as often for other drug convictions. [43] Involvement in the justice system at a young age increases the likelihood of future system involvement, interrupts healthy development, and is a source of trauma, with young Black males at a higher risk due to compounding racial inequities. [44] Youth justice involvement also drives disconnection, with more than two thirds of incarcerated youth never returning to school. [45]



In concert with banning exclusionary practices, implementing programs and practices rooted in restorative justice in schools nationwide has been shown to mitigate the negative consequences of punitive approaches to discipline, reduce the disproportionate exclusion of students of color and those with disabilities, and decrease youth involvement in the juvenile justice system, ultimately disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline. [46,47,48] Restorative approaches are best defined by a set of common values rather than distinct practices, including increased connectedness, accountability, and the promotion of social and emotional growth. A commitment to restorative justice entails changes not just to how a school reacts to student behavior, but how it proactively works to shift the climate that shapes student behavior. Restorative approaches emphasize reflection, mediation, and both inter- and intrapersonal growth in contrast to the hallmarks of punishment and exclusion present in predominant approaches to school discipline. These approaches help to foster a welcoming space in which students and staff alike can show up authentically and work towards healing. [49]

Outside of schools, efforts to reduce the collateral consequences of involvement with the criminal justice system – including impediments to accessing housing, education, and employment – can center on minimizing the reach of the system itself. Upstream reforms aimed at reducing incarceration include greater investment in harm reduction and treatment services for individuals engaged with substance use, as well as a renewed focus on addressing the impacts of racism in the criminal justice system. Downstream, efforts to seal criminal records or expunge past convictions can increase employment and raise wages for impacted individuals within a year of implementation. In addition, deepened investments in recidivism reduction programs and reentry supports – alongside accompanying changes to probation and parole oversight – stand to significantly cut reincarceration rates. [50,51]

RECOMMENDATIONS

Policies that shift school discipline toward more healthy and equitable outcomes will simultaneously improve the overall well-being of students and prevent future disconnection.



The Department of Education can...

- Reinstatement of the 2014 School Discipline Guidance Package to Enhance School Climate and Improve School Discipline Policies/Practices and expansion of the guidance to specifically address equitable disciplinary practices in virtual learning environments.



The Department of Health and Human Services can...

- Work directly with states to provide immediate and regular updates to the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services Medicaid School Health Technical Assistance Guide and Administrative Claiming Guide that reduce administrative burden at the district level and address telehealth provision and billing.

RECOMMENDATIONS



Congress can...

- Invest in the evidenced-based services and programs outlined in the School Discipline Guidance while prohibiting funding for any grants or programs related to exclusionary school discipline, school resource officers, or contracts with local law enforcement.
- Fund a school and community discipline data management program jointly authorizing the Department of Justice Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and the Department of Education Office of Safe and Supportive Students to collaboratively monitor and evaluate school discipline data.
- Amend Every Student Succeeds Act regulations to require that:
 - State and local jurisdictions demonstrate a commitment to implementing restorative justice principles and de-policing schools; and
 - School districts adopt codes of conduct prohibiting identity-based bullying and harassment and report incident data to the Department of Education.
- Fully fund the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act to ensure student needs are met with quality resources and supports rather than disciplinary measures.
- Expand federal funding in physical, behavioral, and public health workforce development to ensure that student-to-staff ratios for counselors, social workers, nurses, and psychologists in schools meet professional standards, with an emphasis on recruitment from Black, Latinx, and Native communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Outside of school, shifting approaches to justice from criminalization to harm reduction and reentry will similarly improve well-being and opportunity access for all youth.



The Department of Justice can...

- Provide funding and technical assistance to states to facilitate automatic record sealing and offer guidance on the standardization of “clean slate” policy implementation.
- Limit reincarceration for technical probation and parole violations.
- Provide guidance on the training of parole and probation officers to emphasize support, mentorship, community resource connections over compliance and control.
- Expand grant funding for evidence-based reentry programs that connect returning citizens with the resources, opportunities, and community necessary to reduce recidivism.

RECOMMENDATIONS



The White House can...

- Build on the work of the American Rescue Plan by including federal funding for evidence-based harm reduction efforts in the annual appropriations process.
- Expand and fully fund evidence-based recidivism reduction programs required by the First Step Act to ensure access for every individual incarcerated in federal prisons.



Congress can...

- Strengthen federal leadership in juvenile justice reform with an emphasis on innovative and evidence-based approaches to address racial and ethnic disparities by reinvesting in the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.
- Guarantee automatic criminal record expungement for nonviolent offenses.

POLICIES, SYSTEMS & STRUCTURES TO SUPPORT YOUTH TRANSITIONS

External, societal factors such as community resources, organizations, and public policies can also be instrumental in maintaining engagement or leading to youth disconnection. Such external supports are especially critical at key transition points, such as when youth transition from middle to high school, graduate from high school, age out of foster care, or exit the justice system. Ensuring alignment of systems and support structures related to education and employment is imperative to keep youth connected to school and work. As both education and employment are social determinants of health, preventing disconnection through systems alignment will safeguard youth as they navigate their academic, professional, and personal futures.

Invest in Well-Aligned Systems

Many existing policies and programs aim to address these inflection points, and some — such as the Every Student Succeeds Act — are successful in this approach but would benefit from more investment. Through ESSA, the federal government can support youth transitions from high school to higher education through funding of evidence-based programs such as Dual Enrollment and Early College High Schools, both of which overwhelmingly benefit underrepresented students. [52,53]



Both Dual Enrollment and Early College High Schools allow students to earn college credit while still in high school, and participation in either makes students more likely to graduate high school, immediately enroll in college, and complete their degree than peers in traditional high school programs. The reach, however, is limited: out of more than 23,000 public secondary schools in the United States, only 300 serve as Early College High Schools. [54,55] And while 82% of U.S. public schools offer dual enrollment, low-income families pay out of pocket in approximately 45% of programs. [56,57]

Whereas ESSA supports the transition from high school to higher education, legislation such as the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act and the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act facilitates critical connections between education and career for those most at risk of disconnection. WIOA funds a broad range of career development initiatives designed to support youth re-engagement, including job readiness programs like Job Corps and YouthBuild – both of which provide low-income youth 16–24 years of age with training, education, and employment support – as well as federal career and technical education programs that help states create connections between high school and postsecondary education and employers. [58] Perkins V, which is designed to increase employment opportunities for chronically unemployed or underemployed populations, provides additional support for incarcerated youth and those transitioning out of foster care, two groups disproportionately at risk of disconnection from both school and the workforce.

Although both WIOA and Perkins V have the potential to serve a significant number of opportunity youth, federal funding for critical workforce programming has decreased by nearly 20% over the past decade while unemployment has fallen by less than 7%. [59,60] Similarly situated programs such as the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood – which provides both education and workforce funding for youth transitioning out of foster care – have seen funding levels increase in response to the COVID-19 pandemic after decades of stagnation, but most provisions are effective only until the end of FY21. [61] Strengthening education, workforce, and national service pathways to meet current need – with an expanded commitment to engaging low-income community residents as service givers, not just service receivers – would improve the prospects for opportunity youth by providing an invitation to directly address systemic issues behind disconnection, expanding pathways to relevant and meaningful work, and treating them with full respect for their intelligence, value, and potential.

Amend Programs to Improve Alignment

Other policies and programs, including Pell Grants, require fine-tuning to actualize intentions. Financial burden is one of the primary barriers opportunity youth face in the pursuit of postsecondary training and education. Student debt is highest – and hardest to overcome – for students of color: in comparison with 66% of their White peers, 90% of Black students and 72% of Latinx students take out loans for higher education, and while on average White borrowers have paid off almost 95% of their loans two decades after graduation, Black students on average still owe 95% of their initial balance at that point in time. [62] The Pell Grant, which provides low- and moderate-income students with direct assistance for postsecondary studies based on financial need, is well situated to alleviate the debt burden for those students most at risk of disconnection. [63,64]

Unfortunately, the maximum value of the Pell Grant has declined significantly relative to the cost of college, and program eligibility has failed to keep up with changing demands of the workforce, continuing to fund only two- and four-year postsecondary programs at the exclusion of high-quality job training programs that can place participants in high-paying jobs with a low debt burden. [65] In addition, undocumented youth – including Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals students – remain ineligible for student loans, work-study, and grants under Title IV. Strengthening the Pell Grant program to equitably meet the needs of low-income families and youth is essential and expanding its applicability to include job training programs would serve to increase economic stability for youth while simultaneously helping to address a growing skilled trades labor shortage that predates the pandemic.

Federal Registered Apprenticeships can also bridge the gap between education and employment by placing participants in paid positions that offer on-the-job training, guaranteed wage increases aligned with skill development, industry-recognized credentials, and a path to future employment. Despite these promises, only 250,000 youth enrolled in Registered Apprenticeships in 2019, as compared with the more than 2 million youth who enrolled in community colleges nationwide. [66] One factor related to poor enrollment is the disconnection between apprenticeship programs and the higher education system, which leaves participants with highly developed technical skills but not the associate's or bachelor's degree necessary to advance in their field. [67] Formal connections between apprenticeships and academic institutions – whether through the creation of “student-apprentice” positions or place-based initiatives – would reduce barriers to enrollment and increase incentives, preventing youth disconnection and potentially facilitating reengagement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Existing policies and programs situated to support youth at critical transition points could better support disconnected youth with stronger investment and alignment.



Congress can...

- Fully fund ESSA programs that are proven to support youth connections to and success in postsecondary education, including Dual Enrollment and Early College High School.
- Maintain pandemic-era expansions to foster care support funds introduced in the Supporting Foster Youth and Families through the Pandemic Act.
- Require colleges to accept multiple forms of documentation for a disability, including an IEP, 504 Plan, or prior evaluation, and fund The National Center for College Students with Disabilities to provide training and resources on services, supports, and accommodations for students with disabilities.
- Fully fund ESSA programs that are proven to support youth connections to and success in higher education, including Dual Enrollment and Early College High School.

RECOMMENDATIONS



Congress can...

- Strengthen the Pell Grant Program by:
 - Increasing the maximum Pell Grant Award;
 - Amending the legislation to annually adjust Pell Grants for inflation;
 - Ensuring that the entirety of Pell Grant funding is made “mandatory” in the annual appropriations process; and
 - Expanding the range of programs covered by Pell Grants to include short-term credentials and other workforce programming offered by institutions of higher education, and expand eligibility to undocumented immigrant youth who are ineligible for DACA.
- Create additional federally subsidized employment opportunities for youth with barriers to employment, including homelessness, and allocate funding for locally run essential services for participants in youth employment programs.
- Strengthen investments in existing, evidence-based federal programs for young people, such as Job Corps, YouthBuild, AmeriCorps, WIOA Title I Youth Activities and Title II Adult Secondary Education Programs, the Reentry Employment Opportunities Program, and the Chafee Education and Training Vouchers Program.
- Fund a new round of grants through the Juvenile Justice Reentry Education Program in the Department of Education Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education and direct states to maximize set-asides for incarcerated youth under Perkins V.

RECOMMENDATIONS



Congress can...

- Establish a 21st Century Civilian Climate Corps prioritizing the engagement of youth who are recent veterans, Native, and low-income.
- Expand pathways to high-quality, well-paying apprenticeships by:
 - Extending the Federal Work-Study Program to cover tuition and fees for students enrolled in degree apprenticeship programs;
 - Incentivizing the establishment of pre-apprenticeships linked directly to registered apprenticeships with career advancement supports and direct entry agreements for graduates to enter two- or four-year institutions; and
 - Establishing a federal loan program for employers interested in developing new apprenticeship programs.
- Expand eligibility of large-scale federal employment initiatives to include undocumented immigrant youth and young people with DACA, temporary protected, refugee, or asylee status and allow for additional flexibility at the state and tribal levels to match requirements to specific populations.
- Expand and increase funding for existing Native workforce development programs and establish a new Indian Youth Corps program.
- Create a new funding stream for organizing low-income youth to create and implement community improvement projects of their own design to address local concerns.

CONSISTENT & EXPANDED ACCESS TO COMPREHENSIVE SUPPORT SERVICES

Presented with even the highest quality programming or the best-aligned systems designed to make connections with school and the workforce, opportunity youth will continue to struggle with disconnection if the supports available to them outside of these structures fail to meet their basic needs. Healthy adolescent development is dependent on proper nutrition, especially in early childhood, yet more than one in six children – disproportionately Black and Latinx – lived in food-insecure households in 2017. [68] Stable housing is a comparable protective factor, yet approximately 30% of people experiencing homelessness are under the age of 24, and one in 10 young adults between 18 and 25 years of age experience some form of homelessness each year. Among these youth, many of the same populations at greatest risk of disconnection – including LGBTQ+, foster, and justice-involved youth – are at disproportionate risk for homelessness. [69]

As the pandemic has surged, so, too, has need: as of February 2021, an estimated 31 million children lived in households struggling to cover basic expenses, with the risk for Black and Latinx families double that of their White and Asian American peers. [70] Federal safety net programs have the potential to fill the gap, but insufficient funding levels and age-based eligibility requirements—which create barriers for youth and fail to account for the blurred lines between dependence and independence—too often result in a significant number of vulnerable young people facing multiple barriers to care, with significant gaps for parenting youth, youth with disabilities, and those transitioning out of foster care or the juvenile justice system. [71] Compounding this, few youth affected by trauma — including the chronic stress associated with food and housing insecurity — have access to adequate mental health services. [72] Studies indicate that children and youth with health care coverage have improved outcomes in health, education, and economic success, with comparable outcomes for public and private programs. [73,74,75] Yet, in 2020, 4.3 million children under the age of 19 were uninsured for the entire year. [76]

To fully engage opportunity youth in reconnection efforts and lessen the risk of disconnect for future generations, stronger support services are needed to ensure healthy, supportive, and stable environments for youth who have been historically underserved by all levels of government. For the one in three opportunity youth living in poverty, adjustments to entitlements such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children — which served just half of all eligible low-income individuals in 2017 — are critical; equally important are renewed investments in rental assistance programs like housing choice vouchers as nearly 40% of low-income individuals are homeless or dedicate more than half of their income to rent. [77,78] Additional investments in and amendments to Medicaid would have a significant impact on medical coverage for opportunity youth, who are enrolled at a rate twice that of their connected peers. [79] Medicaid is particularly crucial in providing a large proportion of mental health and substance use disorder services for populations most at risk of disconnection — especially homeless youth — but such services are limited by behavioral health carveouts, billing restrictions, and inadequate payment rates for mental and behavioral health services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Stronger essential services are needed to ensure healthy, supportive, and stable environments for youth who have been historically underserved.



The Department of Agriculture can...

- Strengthen and increase investments in WIC and SNAP and explore opportunities to expand youth coverage, including extending pandemic-era eligibility for college students.
- Extend pandemic-era expansion of the National School Lunch Program to provide breakfast and lunch to all students free of charge throughout the school year and during summer programming.



The Department of Housing and Urban Development can...

- Strengthen low-income supports—including housing choice vouchers and resources for individuals experiencing short-term housing instability—to meet the full needs of homeless youth and families with children.

RECOMMENDATIONS



The Department of Health and Human Services can...

- Encourage states to avail new opportunities to use Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program to address the social determinants of health, including reimbursing for and encouraging the use of ICD-10 Z codes to document beneficiary needs related to these determinants.
- Strengthen oversight and enforcement of the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act to ensure that Medicaid, CHIP, and commercial insurance plans remove barriers to providing timely, comprehensive mental health care and adequately reimbursing providers.
- Limit and rescind Section 1115 waivers granted by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services that allow states to limit and restrict eligibility, cut benefits, or cap funding, including block grants, work requirements, lockouts, exclusions for mental health and substance use disorder treatment, and elimination of retroactive coverage.
- Confirm that states fully implement the statutory changes to Medicaid included in the Substance Use Disorder Prevention that Promotes Opioid Recovery and Treatment for Patients and Communities Act to ensure that youth Medicaid eligibility is not terminated upon incarceration and that youth are enrolled upon release.
- Invest in and expand the integration of evidence-based behavioral health, mental health, and addiction treatment services in pediatric primary care settings leveraging the Health Resources and Services Pediatric Mental Health Care Access Program, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration grant programs, and child and adolescent mental health workforce expansion.

RECOMMENDATIONS



Congress can...

- Ensure that the Medicaid program receives adequate federal funding by increasing the Federal Medical Assistance Percentage.
- Allow states to cover services for Medicaid beneficiaries who are incarcerated during the 30 days preceding their release to facilitate post-release coverage and access to care.
- Strengthen investments in civil legal aid and other access-to-justice functions under the Department of Justice to help reduce barriers to benefits and entitlements.



The Department of Education can...

- Increase grant funding for high-quality afterschool and summer learning programs for students in all grade levels, prioritizing those in rural settings.

DATA ON THE PATHWAYS TO & PREDICTORS OF DISCONNECTION

Opportunity youth are a difficult population to measure. Their disconnected status inherently means that normal tracking systems such as surveys filled out in schools and the American Community Survey can miss them, and the intersection between disconnected and highly mobile youth – including those who are homeless, in foster care, or entangled in the justice system – further problematizes accurate data collection. In addition, while many researchers, nonprofits, and advocates are collectively working on issues related to youth disconnection, no set of common measures or indicators exists and no single database or national system tracks youth education or employment status over time, hindering the ability to consistently track disconnection across space and time. [80] Compounding these issues is a failure on the part of agencies collecting information on risk factors contributing to disconnection – such as school climate and risky behaviors – to capture complete demographic information. Key federal instruments such as the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System and the Department of Education's School Climate Surveys allow students to self-identify only as “male” and “female”; they do not consistently include questions about transgender identification or sexuality. [81,82,83] As a result, while independent organizations have documented poorer middle and high school experiences for LGBTQ+ youth relative to their cisgender and heterosexual peers, national systems are not set up to measure, analyze, and address the impact of such disparities on youth disconnect.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Advocates, educators, medical professionals, nonprofits, and policymakers need real-time access to complete data about opportunity youth to better address disconnection.



Congress can...

- Implement a national survey for opportunity youth, to be managed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Division of Adolescent and School Health, that establishes common indicators for national data and involves communities in the identification, collection, and communication of data for homeless, foster, and justice-involved youth.



The CDC and the Department of Education can...

- Prioritize and fund longitudinal studies following young people to better measure protective and risk factors related to disconnection.
- Ensure that studies and survey instruments designed to measure school climate and youth experiences, including disconnection, collect complete data on gender and sexual identity.



CONCLUSION

Highly effective programs and essential supports for opportunity youth have already been created, authorized, and proven to make an enormous difference in their ability to return to school and become productively employed citizens for the rest of their lives. These interventions also save tax-payers money by diminishing the needs of individuals later in their lives for government expenses of various kinds. Further, when coupled with national service opportunities and leadership development, they often inspire opportunity youth to become passionate and creative contributors to the common good. The cycle of generational poverty can be broken for millions of youth, young adults, and their children if our nation would implement the comprehensive recommendations in this document. We aim to build a society where every person can participate in a safe and caring community with respect, opportunity, and responsibility for all.

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